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ABSTRACT

The social responsibility theory of the press is usually considered to be a twentieth century development. According to this theory, one of the five major missions of mass communications is to raise social conflict from the plane of violence to the place of discussion. To achieve this, the media should serve as a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism. It is this forum function that Horace Greeley recognized, prized, defended, and exemplified in the pages of his newspaper, the New York "Tribune." It is primarily as a service to his readers that he presented the various reasonable positions that might be taken on public issues. In fact, it seemed almost self-evident to Greeley, that, beyond all other reasons, simple fairness demanded presentation of all sides of an issue. Even when the openness of the "Tribune" resulted in cancelled subscriptions, Greeley clung to his ideals. In fact, Greeley developed a rationale and procedure for the newspaper forum function a century before the Commission on Freedom of the Press proposed it as one of the basic social responsibilities of the mass media. The Greeley forum may have been even more liberal than the one envisioned by the commission, for he gave much more emphasis to the desirability of having opposing views expressed in the very words of their adherents. Those with an interest in the social responsibility theory of the press, therefore, can find in Horace Greeley a historical source and a role model that have been far too long overlooked. (HOD)

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HISTORY DIVISION

HORACE GREELEY AND THE NEWSPAPER FORUM FUNCTION: A NEW SOURCE FOR THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY THEORY

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HORACE GREELEY AND THE NEWSPAPER FORUM FUNCTION

A New Source for the Social Responsibility Theory

The social responsibility theory of the press is usually considered to be a twentieth century development. The seminal explication of that theory, written by the distinguished scholar Theodore Peterson, is contained in Four Theories of the Press. "The twentieth century," he says there, "brought a gradual shift away from pure libertarianism, and in its place began to emerge what has been called the 'social responsibility theory of the press.'"[1] The author recognizes that the theory "has grown out of the ideas of many persons,"[2] and he names several of them, with deserved emphasis on the members of the Commission on Freedom of the Press, but he cites no source earlier than 1900.

One of the principal 'requirements' of that theory, however, was actually set forth and explained in great detail approximately a century before the Commission did its work, and it was published not by some obscure scholar or minor social theorist but by one of the leading editors in the history of American journalism: Horace Greeley of the New York Tribune.

According to the social responsibility theory, one of the five major missions of mass communications is to raise social conflict "from the plane of violence to the plane of discussion."[3] To achieve this, the media should serve as a "forum for the exchange of comment and criticism."[4] "In simple terms, it means that the giants of the press should carry views contrary to their own without abdicating their own right of advocacy."[5]

It is this forum function of the press that Greeley recognized, prized, defended, and exemplified in the pages of his newspaper.

This function--both its theory and its practice--is a major quality of the Tribune, especially during its first twenty years when its style and character were being formed, yet Greeley's biographers and newspaper historians have virtually ignored the attention which he gave to it.[6] As a result, not only have we been left in the dark concerning the views of a major journalist on an important area of media practice, but also we have been misled concerning the historical environment of both the libertarian and the social responsibility theories of the press. This paper will attempt to rectify at least the first of those situations.

Perhaps one reason that Greeley's views on the newspaper forum function have been overlooked is that they were never set forth at one time and in one place. In his autobiography, for example, he described his plan for the Tribune as follows:

> My leading idea was the establishment of a journal removed alike from servile partisanship on the one hand and from gagged, mincing neutrality on the other. Party spirit is so fierce and intolerant in this country that the editor of a non-partisan sheet is restrained from saying what he thinks and feels on the most vital, imminent topics; while, on the other hand, a Democratic, Whig, or Republican journal is generally expected to praise or blame, like or dislike, eulogize or condemn, in precise accordance with the views and interests of its party. I believed there was a happy medium between these extremes, -- a position from which a journalist might openly and heartily advocate the principles and commend the measures of that party to which his convictions allied him, yet frankly dissent from its course on a particular question, and even denounce its candidates if they were shown to be deficient in capacity or (far worse) in integrity.[7]

But neither here nor elsewhere in this book did he say anything about his determination to provide his readers with a diverse market place of ideas. To locate the expression and development of this and other crucial forum ideas, we must pick and choose from among the many editorials and other articles he wrote for his paper.[8]

There he reiterated, first of all, the notion he expressed in his Recollections: that he himself would and should be an active participant in the forum function discussions. In reporting "To our

Patrons and Friends" at the end of the Tribune's first year, he noted, "Whatever errors we may have committed have not been those of indolence or indifference."[9] Later, a house ad stated the point more positively: "...we believe that even those who dislike the politics of our sheet concede to it frankness in avowing its convictions and ability in maintaining them."[10] He praised Isaac Platt, editor of the Poughkeepsie Eagle, "who always speeks his mind frankly, and therefore secures the respect even of those who do not concur in his opinions."[11] And he criticized the Boston Pilot because it had, for a while, donned "a mask of disinterested independence."[12]

Being forthright, then, was partly a matter of simple honesty toward one's readers; it was also a matter of clarity, of attempting to "avoid misunderstanding," as Greeley said in explaining why, after having published one editorial generally commending a speech by Senator William Seward, he thought it necessary to write another one setting forth "some points...to which we do not yield our assent."[13]

"We glory in Free Speech," he exclaimed in an editorial on September 30, 1850. "When anything is said or done in a manner seeming to imply our assent, we claim and endeavor to exercise the right of interposing an emphatic No," he went on to say, asserting the editor's prerogative. But then Greeley quickly added the correlative: "...and we mean to accord a full enjoyment of the same right to others."

What reasons did Greeley have for permitting these "others" to exercise this right on the pages of his publication? Part of the answer seems to be this: If a controversy is going to be fruitful, if there is going to be a useful public debate on public issues, the

competing parties must know and understand what each is really saying, not merely what someone else says each is saying. This point was developed in some detail in an editorial discussing Willard Phillips' book, Propositions Concerning Protection and Free Trade. Because Phillips, like Greeley, was a protectionist, Greeley mostly praised the book, though with some qualifications ("Had it been less shrewish, it might have been shrewd.") But he was not at all happy with the way in which economic discussions in general were being conducted:

> A prominent feature of the Economic discussion of our time is the glaring ignorance betrayed by one party of the arguments of the other. We who stand for Protection have read the works of our antagonists, have studied their arguments--many of us have had them drilled into our ears at College as the infallible axioms of Science. We know not merely what we affirm but what considerations are opposed to such affirmations. When we put forth a proposition, we do so after having maturely considered the facts and arguments whereby that proposition is combated by our antagonists. But our abstruser arguments--our magazines of fact and the principles thence elaborated--are utterly unknown to our adversaries. They cannot state the simplest proposition of our side fairly because they never tried to understand it--never supposed it worth looking into....The consequence is that they never understand us, because they never really try; and, for all practical purposes, the controversy might as well be carried on in Choctaw on the one side and Chinese on the other.
>
> We submit that it is time this playing at cross-purposes were desisted from. If we are to continue the discussion, let us try to come within sight of each other's positions....If they cannot answer what we say, it is high time they stopped attributing to us and arguing against what we don't say. If what we really offer is not worth replying to, it is clearly idle to confute what we do not and never did set forth nor believe in.
>
> It is not long since a correspondent, duly schooled in the Free Trade economy doled out as gospel at the colleges, gravely asked us to take up Dr. Wayland's Political Economy, and answer some of its principal chapters in successive editorials. He had (apparently) never looked into the treatises on our side of the question--never thought of them--seemed unconscious that there were any....
>
> But do our Colleges treat the friends of Protection fairly? Certainly, a large proportion of their Endowments, Funds, Income, Patronage, are derived from our side. In return, they teach our children to deride and scoff at our convictions as selfish,

> antiquated and absurd. Now, we have no objection to their proving all this, if they can; but we protest against their assuming it.--Let them but show us fair play, and they are welcome to confute us if they can. We only ask them to...fairly set forth before their students the arguments of each party, not as their adversaries understand or state them, but as they are stated by their champions respectively....This would be fair, candid, instructive. But to effect it, the Professors would have to know something of what is said on our side....[14]

Several years earlier, in replying to a letter directed specifically to him by name, Greeley began by iterating one of these basic themes:

> The difficulty in bringing this Tariff controversy to a conclusion grows out of the fact that one party pays no attention whatever to the other's arguments. We who stand for Protection read the writings of our opponents, and discuss the question with direct reference to their arguments; but our adversaries coolly assume at the outset that all we have to say is nonsense and absurdity, dictated by selfishness or bigotry, and never take the trouble of listening to us for the first minute. Thus, after we have patiently met their arguments, point after point, and as we think refuted them, they simply repeat their previous assertions, paying no attention to our replies, and deeming themselves unanswered because they have not looked at the answers.[15]

Of course, if all of the disputes involved Greeley as one of the parties, and if all the disputes were of interest only to Greeley and his direct opponents, then there would be no need for the Tribune to present the positions with which Greeley disagreed, for effective argument could be achieved simply by Greeley's reading the publications of his opponents and their reading his publication. But rarely do both of these conditions exist.

Quite often, Greeley was an observer or an unpire rather than a participant in a dispute.[16] Thus to make sure that those who were participants were made aware of the views of their opponents, he printed them all in his newspaper.

Much more importantly, in nearly all instances, Greeley assumed that the public controversies which interested him were probably also

of interest to at least a portion of his readers. Or it may be more accurate to say that he felt a responsibility to interest himself in those matters which were important to his readers. "The Public Press," he said in an editorial on April 4, 1857, "has become so important to the education, intelligence, good government and well-being of the People that great responsibilities devolve on its conductors, and great opportunities for good or evil constantly solicit them."

Thus it was primarily as a service to his readers that he thought it necessary to give to them, in the very words of their defenders, the various positions which might reasonably be taken on public issues. This was stated most forcefully in the editorial announcing that a special pamphlet had been published containing the key documents relating to the Dred Scott decision: "No American citizen can be properly qualified to vote on the momentous questions which lie directly before us unless he has read the opinions of our highest tribunal on this controversy--not one side, merely, of the case, but both sides."[17] The same point was the basis on which Greeley frequently criticized competing newspapers. "Let us see if it is willing to have its reader see both sides of this deeply important question," he said to the New York Evening Post when challenging it to reprint an entire Tribune article on the New York canal question after he had printed an entire Evening Post editorial on the subject.[18] Two days later Greeley repeated the attack:

> The Evening Post refuses to print our rejoinder to its calumnies, coolly observing that 'we' don't feel that we have done The Tribune any injustice. Of course not. We didn't expect you to see what you had before determined not to see; but we asked you to let your readers see our answer to your charges of systematic fraud....We printed those charges in

> full, with the logic and evidence whereby you claimed to support them--then why should you not print our reply? Our readers have seen both sides; why should not yours?[19]

Greeley had confidence in the readers' ability to discern the truth once they have been given all the relevant facts and arguments. For instance, after quoting entire an editorial from the Boston Commonwealth on an old controversy between the supporters of James Birney and Henry Clay, he said:

> We give The Commonwealth's statement in full, because we wish our readers to see, as we think they must, that prejudice and passion, vindictiveness and blind personal hatred, controlled the action of the Birneyites in 1844, and caused the result which we so deeply deplore. We think that truth must be evident to the intelligent and penetrating reader, even from their own story.[20]

Although firm in his own views, Greeley recognized that he -- and his concurring readers--could be mistaken; the treasure of truth was not possessed only by him and those who agreed with him. Thus, when The Commercial of Wilmington, North Carolina, ran a letter signed "A Northerner," claiming that the northern poor were no better off than the southern slaves, Greeley not only reprinted the letter but also urged the writer to continue his critique:

> Mr. 'Northener,' we pray you to go ahead with your exposé of the wrongs and sufferings of Poverty in the Free States. Speak plainly and cut to the quick. We of the North will neither get up riots therefor, nor rob the Post-Offices of the papers containing your articles, nor gas about dissolving the Union. We believe in Free Discussion, and are not afraid of the consequences of telling the truth. Tell us our faults; for we know we have faults; and show us how to redress the wrongs you so justly deprecate.[21]

The readers were not well served, Greeley thought, unless they were provided not only with opposing arguments but also with those arguments in their strongest forms. Thus, after quoting about 650 words from the Albany Evening Journal in dissent from the Tribune's proposal

for "tolling the Central Railroad," Greeley added, "We have thus given place to The Journal's argument, and to the greater portion of its entire article; for we wish that our readers shall see the full strength of the case against us, and we do not believe it can be made stronger than the foregoing...."[22]

In fact, it seemed almost self-evident to Greeley that, beyond all other reasons, simple fairness demands the presentation of all sides of an issue. Thus, "As we have published, at considerable length, the statements of Judge Drummond against the Mormons, it is but fair to those whom he accuses to insert the following."[23] And when the Tribune printed a letter from a Chicago Republican regarding the 1858 Senate race in Illinois, an editorial drew the readers' attention to the letter and added, "Having, however, already given full expression to our views on the subject generally, we cheerfully give place to our Illinois correspondent, and allow him the last word."[24] Earlier, the Tribune had published a Supplement containing a letter headed "The Catholics, the Jesuits and J.A. McMaster," which was followed by this editorial note:

> We don't pretend to understand this controversy, and take no part in it. Having given place to the above to oblige a friend, we feel constrained to proffer an equal space to the party inculpated therein. There the controversy, so far as The Tribune is concerned, must cease.[25]

In addition, Greeley presented several other reasons for providing space to those who held views with which he disagreed. For example, the procedure exonerated him from any accusations that his reports were inaccurate. "The readers of The Tribune had the Post's article commented on fully and fairly before them," Greeley noted in one of his debates with the New York Evening Post on the topic of Free Trade, "and could of course judge whether we perverted or

misrepresented it."[26]

Greeley recognized that presenting material with which his readers did not agree would upset some of them. "It seems that we have jarred the nerves of certain contemporaries by some recent plain spoken articles on the commercial, pecuniary profit to the Free States of their Federal Union with those that cherish and seek to extend Slavery," he said. But then he added, "As we apprehend no evil from free discussion, and desire to present the subject in all its aspects to the public mind, we copy their strictures entire."[27] In fact, in general, he thought the best way to deal with 'unpleasant' matters was to present them fully and frankly, for only then could they adequately be criticized or refuted. Thus, when he was chastised for giving space to those who favor free love, he replied:

> Believing it to be intensely mischievous, we have endeavored to drag 'Free Love' out of the secrecy and mystery in which it had enveloped itself, and expose it to the light of discussion. We trust nothing more is needed to ensure its general and earnest reprobation.[28]

Similarly, he thought, publicity was the best way to handle at least some instances of unfounded gossip:

> Archbishop Hughes explicitly and indignantly denies the story of a secret Roman Catholic organization for the propagation and defense of that Church, which we copied last week from the Albany Statesman. We have no doubt of the truth of this denial. We published The Statesman's story as a part of the gossip of the day, believing that it would be refuted if, as seemed highly probable, it was a fabrication.[29]

Even when the Tribune's openness resulted in cancelled subscriptions, Greeley clung to his ideals. For example, the paper published Theodore Parker's less-than-laudatory "Discourse Occasioned by the Death of Daniel Webster" not because Greeley agreed with it

but because it qualified "the innumerable host of mere eulogies." A torrent of protest quickly followed. "How many subscribers its publication in The Tribune cost us we cannot precisely tell--certainly, a good many hundreds--yet the good it did," Greeley wrote, "was cheap even at that price."[30] Earlier, a minister had asked that his name be taken off the subscription list because the Tribune had reprinted some material indicating that General Winfield Scott had respect for the Catholic religion.[31] And a postmaster at Lynchburg, Virginia, considered the Tribune to be of such "incendiary character" that he refused to continue delivering it.[32]

On the other hand, Greeley was also aware that the policy of permitting opponents to occupy space in the Tribune sometimes helped circulation by making the paper more interesting. Thus, when letters from a Paris correspondent became a regular feature in the paper, Greeley noted, "While we do not always adopt his views, we are confident that his letters must excite in this country a degree of attention paid to those of no other regular European correspondent of the American press."[33] It also gave at least some readers confidence in the integrity of the publication. For example, New York congressman Horace F. Clark, in a 4,500-word letter replying to a Tribune accusation that he had not supported the right candidate for Speaker of the House, pointed out, "The offer of your columns for the purpose of correction, gives assurance that the spirit which inspired your article is that of justice rather than reproach."[34]

Greeley apparently thought newspaper access was so important that he even begrudgingly granted space in his paper for the replies

of people who had been attacked (but not given space for reply) in the pages of another paper:

> One of the chief terrors of an Editor's harassed lot is--not, by any means, the libel-suits with which paltry pettifoggers contrive to infest him, nor yet the indignant nuisances who stalk into his office to talk of cowhides and revolvers when he wants to be quietly attending to his own business, but--the good people who most unreasonably insist on engrossing his columns with replications to attacks made upon them by somebody else... [T]he man with a grievance for which said editor is nowise responsible is his despair. [35]

Because Greeley was so generous in providing access to his paper, some of his readers began to think that they had a right to a share of space. This was clearly the view of a subscriber whose letter-to-the-editor was published on April 26, 1848:

> Have the proprietors of a public journal the right to select from their correspondence such matter as they may feel disposed to publish, without regard to the views and feelings of the correspondent or has the correspondent a right to demand the full publication of his communication--without regard to the peculiar views of the editor? The People support the Press, and it appears to me the People ought to have some recognized right by which they could appear before the public without extra charge. I subscribe to your paper, and pay in advance; must I receive that paper as you are pleased to make it up, or have I an interest in it to the amount of the subscription, and therefore a right to a certain extent to say what shall or shall not be published in that paper?

Greeley's reply, signed "Ed. Trib.," was unequivocal:

> We have never understood that a man, by the mere fact of subscribing to a paper, becomes one of its Editors, any more than by riding on a steamboat he becomes associate captain, pilot, mate or engineer--any more than by boarding at a hotel he becomes associate landlord, waiter or boots. The newspaper is a commodity, which he chooses to buy or let alone, just as he buys Woodbridge's or some other Geography, Adams's or some other Arithmetic. Just imagine a man insisting on the insertion of a page of his own in Woodbridge or Adams because he had bought several copies of either.
>
> --As to 'the People,' etc. our correspondent has probably heard of the three tailors in Tooley at London, who held a meeting and issued an Address beginning, 'We, the People of England.' We can tell him that a paper in which each taker should have a 'recognized right' as a subscriber to insert

> a finger length or so (and if anything why not a column?) would be the most indigestible hodge podge that mortal ever encountered, and would very soon cease from troubling.
>
> The Editor, on the very lowest assumption, fills the place and must discharge the duties of an umpire between those who may struggle for a hearing through his columns. He must judge (since it is impossible that a general vote should in each case be taken) whether a majority of his hundred thousand readers would probably agree with that one who insists that his article--perhaps a puff of some musical gridiron or steam schoolmaster he has just invented--shall be inserted or would rather prefer a letter from Paris, or part of a debate in Congress. And whenever it shall be settled that a correspondent has a right to <u>demand</u> the full insertion of what he sends us, we think most Editors will black their faces and get some kind friend to sell them to the cultivator of a Carolina rice swamp if nothing else offers in the way of earning an honest livelihood beside editing.
>
> --Of course we recognize the right of a correspondent to say, "Publish every word of this, or publish none of it." Such a request would be entitled to implicit deference. In the absence of anything of the sort, however, an Editor may fairly presume that the writer intended to enlighten and aid rather than embarrass him and would prefer that he should publish such portions of his article as he deems of general interest rather than none at all.

To "discharge the duties of an umpire," therefore, Greeley gradually developed a set of 'ground rules' regulating the exercise of the forum function in his newspaper. "It is physically impossible that we should publish even one-fourth of the articles sent us," he said in a notice "To Correspondents" on the editorial page. "The fact that we fail to print an article, therefore, implies no want of respect for the writer, no lack of sympathy with his views, and certainly no desire to suppress his opinions, but simply that we have no room."[36]

Precious space was wasted, Greeley thought, when it was occupied with material merely "applauding our course."[37] In replying to a letter from a Free Black, he begged "all correspondents henceforth to oblige us by <u>not</u> putting into any of their communications for our

columns one syllable of commendation of The Tribune."[38] And equally as useless, Greeley said, were communications which repeated what the paper had already said: "We seldom publish letters plentifully written us, reiterating and confirming the views previously set forth in these columns."[39]

In order to assure diversity of views, Greeley not only rejected material which agreed with the views of the Tribune, he also attempted to prevent duplication of opposing views. Thus, when the paper received a number of letters in favor of "Specie Currency as the true and only remedy for our commercial ills," Greeley printed a single essay, saying, "It is one of several of like tenor which have recently reached us; and, since we cannot print them all, we select the best to represent the class."[40] A week later, he printed another essay on the financial position of the country and suggested that readers give attention to the writer's views "with less regard to their intrinsic worth than to their representative significance."[41]

So that he might provide space to as many different writers as possible, Greeley pleaded with his readers to keep a tight rein on the length of their contributions. For instance, an editorial titled "An ex-Barnburner's Apology" began:

> We gave on Monday our view of the recent self-extinquishment of the 'Free Soil' party of our state at Utica and Syracuse, which seems to have been regarded as unflattering by some of the relics of the abandoned party. One of them, a personal friend, asked permission to reply through The Tribune, which we, with our proverbial good nature, at once accorded, on the single condition that he should confine himself within the length of our own article on the subject. His reply reached us yesterday, and is nearly or quite twice the length we had consented to publish....[42]

Greeley went ahead and published the entire letter anyway. In an editorial titled "Catholic and Know-Nothing," he made a similar offer

to those who might want to reply to a letter by a professor who protested a religion test for public positions.[43] Later, he made his space offer twice as generous, even though his opponents, in that instance, already had many outlets for their views. His editorial titled "Pro Rata" began:

> We have been favored with several essays by opponents of the Pro Rata bill now before our Legislature, intended to confute the views on that subject recently set forth in these columns. The adversaries of Pro Rata have already all, or nearly all, the journals of this City but The Tribune actively enlisted on their side, with both the leading journals at Albany; but they seem unable to get along without having at least half The Tribune in addition to their present Press-power. Now we cannot print all these essays, but we are willing to give all sides a hearing; and we here offer to publish such article adverse to Pro Rata as a majority of those members of the Legislature who oppose Pro Rata shall designate, on the single condition that it shall not contain over twice so many words as our own article on the subject, which appeared on the 16th inst.[44]

Sometimes, when the writers themselves did not exercise adequate restraint in limiting the length of their contributions, Greeley felt justified in printing only so much of an article as would "show the full scope of its logic,"[45] or "exhibit the principles involved,"[46] or "show the drift of the article."[47] If space was unusually tight and "we had other matter to publish which seemed to us more interesting and important," he would sometimes limit himself to making "a fair synopsis of its ideas and leading propositions," as he noted in replying to a criticism for not having published the whole of a speech by Governor Washington Hunt. But he much preferred to let contributors speak in their own words; thus, even in the Governor Hunt instance, he did include approximately 800 words of direct quotation.[48]

As another effort to establish some limits to the size of the forum, Greeley attempted to identify some topics which he hoped could be excluded altogether. There was, for example, the subject of spiritualism. In 1850, less than a year after the death of the Greeleys' son Pickie, both Horace and his wife had some first-hand experiences with the Fox family, who conducted several seances at the Greeley home and provided some 'messages' from their dead child. For a time, Horace was favorably impressed by the various manifestations, and in 1853 he devoted a long editorial to "Modern 'Spiritualism,'" including a 300-word quotation from John S. Adams' Answers to Seventeen Objections against Spiritual Intercourse.[49] But his attitude later became ambivalent. Concerning the communications made by the mediums, he said, "That some of them are the result of juggle, collusion, or trick, I am confident; that others are not, I decidedly believe."[50] As to the value of the subject for his readers, however, Greeley seemed much more definite:

> A respected correspondent in Michigan sends us the first of a series of communications based on what is commonly called Spiritualism, which he proffers for publication through our columns. We decline them, because we cannot perceive that our readers generally would be instructed or profited by their perusal....[51]

Nevertheless, this statement did not bring about a complete blackout of the subject. Only a month later, when The Courier offered a $500 reward for any tested "Spiritualism" phenomena and a committee of eminent Professors of the Natural Sciences at Harvard University were judging the claimants, The Tribune gave generous space to all sides of the subject.[52]

He also said that he would not give space to articles advocating

the revival of the African slave-trade. L.W.Spratte of Charleston, South Carolina, had written to Greeley, protesting that the Tribune had criticized several of Spratte's articles when they were published in the New Orleans Delta but had not reprinted any of the pieces that were criticized. "[I]t is neither law nor justice to condemn without a hearing," Spratte wrote. Although Greeley had frequently expressed that same viewpoint, in this instance he reprinted Spratte's letter but adamantly refused to publish the article which he had enclosed:

> We cannot comply with his request, and we will tell Mr. Spratte plainly why we cannot. We endeavor as perfectly as possible to exclude immoral articles from our columns. We must draw the line somewhere. Should we print Mr. Spratte's apology for piracy, some gentleman in the house-breaking line will next demand room in our columns in which to demonstrate the necessity of his amiable profession; and he may be followed by the aggrieved garroters, the injured defaulters, and by ill-treated rogues of all kinds and classes. Mr. Spratte must see with half an eye that we should soon have our hands full. Because we see fit, in the exercise of a grave public duty, to denounce a palpable villainy, it does not follow that we should give the villain a hearing.[53]

This statement is most uncharacteristic of Greeley. As indicated above, he had frequently upheld the desirability of letting his readers see all viewpoints and to read them as they were written by those who held them. Although he had earlier said that it was not to every new thought but to every generous thought--those which "propose to improve the Moral, Intellectual or Social condition of mankind"--that the Tribune would give hospitality,[54] he had in many other situations granted his correspondents the benefit of the doubt when the beneficence of their views was questioned. And, as with the subject of Spiritualism, Greeley's determination to exclude this type of material was not maintained; only a few months later, articles in support of the slave-trade

were being quoted in the Tribune. Thus, on October 5, 1858, an editorial devoted to the recent establishment of the Philadelphia Southern Monitor, "a newspaper which openly and persistently advocates the reestablishment of the African slave-trade," contained a 300-word quotation from that paper urging that Africans must be brought to this country as slaves so that they can be converted to Christianity. And on September 1, 1858, he quoted more than 600 words from The Southern Cultivator of Atlanta, Georgia, "to show that the purpose of reopening the Slave-Trade is seriously entertained by a strong and rapidly increasing party at the South."[55]

Greeley also maintained that most "personal attacks" were unsuitable for publication in the Tribune or, for that matter, in any newspaper. But he also noted that 'public' persons need not be given the same protection from criticism that 'private' persons deserve:

> Whatever has rightfully become a public concern, should be subjected to the fullest and freest discussion. The conduct of every public functionary, the character of every aspirant to office, should be exposed to the most unsparing scrutiny, for this the public good imperatively demands. But a private citizen, who minds his own business and wants no public trust, has a right to immunity from all other than legal inquisition, even though he may have done something that renders him an object of extreme local interest....
>
> ...We trust the Editors will consider the point and resolve to strike every paragraph relating to persons not legitimately or voluntarily before the public, out of the letters they may publish hereafter.[56]

Thus, when the poet Nathaniel Parker Willis drew to Greeley's attention the fact that there had been published in the Tribune a letter making "an allusion to my personal character, which probably escaped your notice," the editor immediately replied: "The insinuation so very full and properly repelled by Mr. Willis would have been suppressed had it

not escaped our observation."[57] On the other hand, when Richard W. Thompson, who had served several terms as a Whig member of Congress from Indiana, protested that "Your attack upon me and a speech of mine...entitles me to be heard in reply through the columns of The Tribune,"--and then went on to fill three and one-half columns with his reply--a Tribune editorial expressed an indignant protest:

> Let us here observe that, while we yield the space, we repel most emphatically the claim of Mr. Thompson to occupy our columns at such length. He had made and printed a Political Speech, which is a labored and bitter attack on the great mass of his old compatriots in the Free States. That speech invited criticism, and received it in these columns. Here was no case of a private man dragged unwillingly before the public; on the contrary. Mr. Thompson volunteered his appearance as a gladiator and assailant. We have just the same right to demand that our strictures shall be bound up and circulated with his printed speech as he has that his reply shall appear in The Tribune. No matter--his letter appears in full in this paper, and we hope it will attract the attention at least of political readers.[58]

When Greeley chastised the "Press of the country" for a lack of courtesy and forbearance toward each other while participating in the forum and for being "too apt to enter the arena as gladiators and blacken each other's reputations quite as often as they elucidate each other's errors of fact or of judgement," the Herald and the Times immediately assumed (quite rightly) that the charge was aimed at them, and both of those New York papers rebuked his "well-meant efforts." Greeley said that, if anyone claimed that he had been guilty of the same offense, "we are unconscious of having ever resorted to the personal crimination of a cotemporary except in self-defense and under the stimulus of grave provocation." The exception, of course, granted him great leeway, and there were few opposing editors who had escaped

his editorial knife. Thus, when he added, "But, whether we be correct or mistaken in this conviction, a good principle is not subverted by fifty violations of it on our part," his readers might have agreed but with the qualification that the number of violations was much too low.[59]

Whether he was stinging or being stung, Greeley's general rule was "to let anybody call us hard names--no matter how hard--with impunity." At least once, however, and quite reluctantly, he resorted to a suit for libel as a means of keeping civil the public dialogue. It was not the best way, he was convinced, to settle public issues; the legal decision, as often as not, failed to be the correct decision. But in some rare instances the law might act as a deterrent to the most "malignant enemies" who "prey upon our reputation, expressly to cripple our influence and business."[60]

More to his liking was the practice of letting all writers have their say. In addition to requesting that they avoid undue length, repetition of views and vituperation, he asked only two things of them: that they write clearly and correctly and that they sign their names to their contributions.

The first criterion he was willing to ignore whenever the writers were describing news events--especially fires, explosions, railroad accidents, and the like--which they had witnessed. Then, he said, "Let us have the essential facts at the earliest moment, even though it should require hours to decipher and civilize the manuscript, even outnumbering the moments devoted to its composition." On the other hand, when correspondents wished to "set the Press or the Public right on some question of public or private interest," then "the case is bravely altered":

> In such case, we feel insulted by an intimation that the author wrote in great haste, and will thank or graciously permit us to revise his grammar and spelling. What right has he to impose upon us this labor? Does he suppose his own time of so much greater consequence, or his leisure so much more limited, than ours? Does he imagine communications such a rarity with us that we are glad to welcome any crude production, and it lick patiently into shape? Does he fancy that he confers a favor on us by sending something that will serve to fill up a column? In either case, he is grievously in error.

He was more than willing "to be instructed, counseled, admonished, rebuked by our readers or others," Greeley said, "provided this be done with due respect to chirography, brevity, directness, orthography and grammar."[61]

But, like so many of the other ground rules that Greeley attempted to establish, this one too was not enforced with perfect consistency. One writer who confessed to much ignorance of both spelling and grammar, for example, bragged that the Tribune had published "in the last five years, full fifty columns of matter from my copy."[62]

Whether Greeley consistently required the second criterion is difficult to determine, for, though he demanded that contributors sign their pieces, he did not insist that the name of the writer be published. For instance, this notice "To Correspondents" headed one of the editorial columns:

> No notice can be taken of anonymous Communications. Whatever is intended for insertion must be authenticated by the name and address of the writer--not necessarily for publication, but as a guarantee of his good faith.[63]

It is clear, however, that at least a few pieces were rejected because they did not bear the writer's name. One such case involved a critic of Archbishop John Hughes, who asked that he be given as much space as had been allotted to the Archbishop. Greeley replied:

> Yes--when his statements are backed by responsible names--not before. As a general rule, we hold every writer of an anonymous letter or paper inculpating others to be an unmitigated scoundrel....[64]

Again, when "A Reader" requested that an enclosed communication be published, Greeley printed the request but rejected the enclosure, saying, "We judge 'A Reader' to be a fool, not merely from the style in which he writes, but because he carefully withholds his real name, without which he ought to be aware that no attention can be paid to his statements."[65]

Particularly abhorrent to Greeley were those who took potshots at others while hiding behind the bush of anonymity:

> The rule is this: <u>The anonymous accuser is always a liar</u>. We will warrant this to hold good ninety-nine times in a hundred. He may sometimes have a slight nucleus of fact around which to weave his fable, but his story is in essence a lie or he would not hide behind a mask in uttering it.[66]

In summary, then, it is clear that Horace Greeley developed a rationale and procedure for the newspaper forum function a century before the Commission on Freedom of the Press proposed it as one of the basic social responsibilities of the mass media. As we have seen, he, too, believed, as the Commission said, that "Civilized society... must make sure that as many as possible of the ideas which its members have are available for its examination."[67] He, too, asserted the Commission position that "it does belong to the intention of the freedom of the press that an idea shall have its chance even if it is not shared by those who own or manage the press."[68] He, too, proclaimed that newspapers "should assume the duty of publishing significant ideas contrary to their own,"[69] and that though "Access to a unit of the press acting as a common carrier is possible in a number of ways, all...

involve selection on the part of the managers of the unit ."[70] He argued long before the Commission did that "Whether a unit of the press is an advocate or a common carrier, it ought to identify the sources of its facts, opinions, and arguments so that the reader... can judge them."[71] He was strongly aware that, as the Commission said, "People seldom want to read or hear what does not please them; they seldom want others to read or hear what disagrees with their convictions or what presents an unfavorable picture of groups they belong to."[72] Yet the press must accept the responsibility of presenting such unpleasant material, he believed, including "criticism of the press by the press,"[73] all in order that "the agencies of mass communication accept the responsibilities of common carriers of information and discussion."[74]

In fact, the Greeley forum may have been even more liberal than the one envisaged by the Commission, for he emphasized much more than they did the desirability of having opposing views expressed in the very words of their adherents. It was one of the key notes of his idea of the forum that the press set forth "the arguments of each party, not as their adversaries understand or state them, but as they are stated by their champions respectively."[75]

Those with an interest in the social responsibility theory of the press, therefore, can find in Horace Greeley a historical source and a role model that have been far too long overlooked.

FOOTNOTES

1 Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm, Four Theories of the Press (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956), p. 73. For a similar statement, see William L. Rivers, Wilbur Schramm and Clifford G. Christians, Responsibility in Mass Communication (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 43.

2 Siebert, et al., op. cit., p. 75.

3 Commission on Freedom of the Press, A Free and Responsible Press (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), p. 113.

4 Ibid., p. 20. Also see p. 67.

5 Siebert, et. al., op. cit., p. 90.

6 In the Epilogue to the book, Glyndon G. Van Deusen, Horace Greeley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), p. 430, the author does say that "The newspaper that he founded and guided to maturity was a great newspaper, its columns fed by able and often brilliant correspondents, its pages a public forum where widely variant points of view were presented in such exciting and thought-compelling fashion as has seldom if ever been seen, before or since, in the public press of America," but he does not develop this point nor mention it elsewhere in his book.

7 Recollections of a Busy Life (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1971), p. 137.

8 Most of the views concerning the forum function which are attributed to Greeley in this article appeared in the editorial columns of the New York Tribune. Several of these editorial comments were signed with Greeley's name or initials, but the majority of them were anonymous. Since many persons in addition to Greeley contributed to the editorial columns of the paper--see Harry W. Baehr Jr., The New York Tribune Since the Civil War (New York: Octagon Books, 1972), p. 16--it is possible that some of the words here attributed to him were actually written by someone else. But there is little doubt he was in charge of the Tribune, that he was the one who directed the course of the paper, especially during its first twenty years--see Henry Luther Stoddard, Horace Greeley (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1946), pp. 70-71, 90-93--and that he accepted responsibility for the editorial statements even when they did not come directly from his pen -- see his signed editorial, "Just Once," July 25, 1861. But to increase the likelihood that the views reported here as his were actually those expressed by Greeley, I have taken care to avoid attributing to him any words that were published during those many periods when Greeley was known to have been absent from the Tribune offices: from mid-September to mid-October, 1843, when he was travelling in the midwest; during June and July, 1847, and from the end of August to September 27, 1848, when he was inspecting his Lake Superior mining property; from December 4, 1848 to March 6,

1849, when he was serving in the House of Representatives; from April 11 to August 6, 1851, and from April to July, 1855, when he made trips to Europe; from December 3, 1855 to about March 1, 1856, when he was covering the House of Representatives in Washington; from late January to March, 1857, when he was travelling in the midwest; from May 9 to September 26, 1859, when he travelled to the west coast, and from about mid-January to February 18, 1860, when he was on a lecture tour of the midwest.

9 April 12, 1842.

10 August 16, 1858.

11 May 5, 1853.

12 October 25, 1852.

13 March 15, 1858.

14 June 13, 1850. The entire editorial is more than two columns long.

15 August 8, 1848. See October 4, 1858 for a similar statement.

16 See the dispute between "H" and the Rev. Dr. Cheever on the question of capital punishment, February 15, 1853; the discussions concerning woman lawyers and woman workers between E. Oakes Smith and her many letter writers, November 9, 1955; the debate between the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher and Dion Bourcicault regarding the morality of the stage, May 12 and May 15, 1857.

17 July 4, 1857.

18 May 17, 1852.

19 May 19, 1852. Also see "The Proof from Facts" editorial, August 11, 1851, and the untitled editorial on Kansas, November 15, 1856.

20 February 9, 1852.

21 February 23, 1853.

22 March 31, 1858.

23 June 10, 1857.

24 May 27, 1858.

25 October 16, 1849. For other expressions of Greeley's concern for fairness, see "Free Trade and Abbott Lawrence," September 25, 1847; "The Tribune and Slavery," June 4, 1852; the untitled editorial criticizing a minister who had protested General Winfield Scott's respect

for the Catholic religion, July 2, 1852; "Parker on Webster," March 26, 1853; the untitled editorial concerning those who quote the Bible in favor of slavery, May 4, 1853; the untitled editorial concerning financial problems, November 6, 1857; the untitled editorial on Kansas, June 2, 1858, and the untitled editorial replying to the Christian Intelligencer, July 1, 1858.

26 September 25, 1847. On June 7, 1855, during Greeley's second trip to Europe, the Tribune also carried an editorial discussing "The True Ground of Slavery" with the Charleston Standard. This said, in part, "That we may not be accused of misrepresenting The Standard's positions we copy the essential part of its article into another column."

27 May 2, 1854.

28 October 24, 1855.

29 May 24, 1858.

30 March 26, 1853.

31 July 2, 1852.

32 December 10, 1859.

33 May 1, 1848. Also see the editorial "New-York Journalism," in which Greeley criticized "The peculiar Bostonian notion...that a paper should be conduted with a special caveat against making it interesting to the public." March 12, 1859.

34 January 31, 1860.

35 November 14, 1859.

36 February 18, 1852.

37 July 3, 1846.

38 September 26, 1855. Also see the untitled editorial replying to the Buffalo Commercial Advertiser, November 3, 1853.

39 January 5, 1860.

40 October 2, 1857.

41 October 10, 1857.

42 September 20, 1849 Supplement.

43 July 13, 1854.

44 February 23, 1860.

45 December 17, 1857, referring to a New York Times article on the forthcoming vote in Kansas.

46 March 29, 1858, concerning Congressman Orsamus B. Matteson.

47 September 1, 1858, relating to a criticism of The Southern Cultivator of Atlanta, Georgia.

48 March 28, 1859.

49 February 23, 1853.

50 Greeley, Recollections, p. 241.

51 May 22, 1857.

52 See June 9, 1857; June 26, 1857; July 2, 1857.

53 December 16, 1857.

54 May 29, 1845.

55 Concerning Greeley's views on publishing 'immoral articles,' also see the June 2, 1858 editorial in which he said, "we print everything which reaches us calculated to shed light on the new troubles in Kansas" even though some of the material is "essentially and often wickedly false," and the May 4, 1853 editorial stating, "we have allowed free speech and fair play to Infidels without intending to favor their views."

56 October 11, 1854.

57 October 18, 1849.

58 January 10, 1856. Since this was published during the period when Greeley was in Washington covering the House, it is possible that the editorial was not written by Greeley himself. It is, however, very congruent with other Greeley statements, especially the October 11, 1854, editorial, cited at note 56, above.

59 April 14, April 18, 1857.

60 January 12, 1857.

61 July 8, 1857.

62 July 13, 1857

63 May 9, 1853.

64 May 27, 1858.

65 January 1, 1859.

66 October 11, 1854.

67 Commission on Freedom of the Press, op. cit., p. 6.

68 Ibid., p. 9.

69 Ibid., pp. 23-4.

70 Ibid., p. 24.

71 Ibid., p. 25.

72 Ibid., p. 57.

73 Ibid., p. 66.

74 Ibid., p. 92.

75 New York Tribune, June 13, 1850.